

Sermon on Mark 10:17-31 and Hebrews 4:12-16**Susan Verbrugge****October 11, 2009****Blacksburg Presbyterian Church**

On Sunday mornings, I am lucky. I get to sit up here and look out on all of your faces. I know most of you. I know some of your stories. I know about some of your lives because you have given me the privilege of walking with you. You have blessed me by sharing your lives with me. And so, on Sunday mornings, I look out from my spot behind the communion table and smile...if not outwardly, then inwardly. And, some Sundays, I sit back here and wonder. I wonder what it is that brings you here Sunday after Sunday. There are lots of other things you could be doing. Sleeping, relaxing, eating brunch, reading the paper, catching up on e-mail, playing with your child, buying groceries, taking a hike, and on and on and on. And yet, you choose to be here.

My guess is it's because you are seeking to follow Jesus, to be a disciple. We are all still trying to figure out what that means. We are all not yet made complete so we continue to search. We continue to say to ourselves, "Surely, there is something more, something else I should be doing."

And maybe, all those years ago, that is exactly what the man who approaches Jesus is asking as well. Apparently, he has all he needs. Even though we aren't told outright in Mark's gospel account, the other gospel accounts of this story tell us that this is a rich, young man, even a ruler. In Jesus' time, the rich were seen as having found God's favor. They were "in" so to speak. This man was living in the lap of luxury. He had his health. He was esteemed within his community. He says he had tried to live right, according to the commandments, for his whole life. And yet...and yet, he felt something missing deep within. Surely, there had to be more. So, he came to Jesus. Not only did he come to Jesus, he ran to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It seems an incredibly brave question to me. He has no idea what the answer might be, and yet, in his emptiness, he is willing to ask. What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to really follow you for I believe that you have life and I, with all my wealth, still feel empty.”

And Jesus looked at him and loved him. Now, Jesus didn't just glance at him with his eyes. He looked at him, looked and saw deeply within this man-saw that he really was searching for life-saw that he was clutching tight to his riches-saw what was holding him back from life. And, Jesus loved him. One professor says, “In loving the young man, Jesus sees him as he truly is, but in a way that the young man is not yet capable of seeing himself” (Wadell, Paul, *Living By the Word, Christian Century*, October 6, 2009. 18). Jesus wants him to have this life he is seeking, so Jesus answers him honestly, reaches out to him with the offer of life.

The answer Jesus gives is one the man wasn't expecting. How could he do this radical thing Jesus was asking? Give away everything to the poor? Seriously? And so he goes away deeply saddened. But notice...it doesn't say that at that moment Jesus stopped loving him. Jesus continued to love him deeply. And notice, we aren't told whether the man came back a few days later, able to put aside all he had and follow. There is much hope here.

Jesus' words pierce us, “sharper than any two edged sword”. The Word digs deep within us, penetrates us, knows us. It lays us bare. “Give away all that you have and come and follow me.” The Word finds what it is that separates the young man and us from God.

Now, we could say that this passage, for us, isn't about money. We could rationalize it as has been done many times before. We could say that it is about whatever is in our lives that gets between us and living the life Jesus calls us to. It could be money or security or spouses or children or guilt or job or alcohol or status or physical fitness or any number of things. And all of these could be very well true because all of these things can come between us and Jesus. These can overtake life and become our God. So this is surely what this story is about.

But, I think that we sell it short if we try to make it not be about money. For those of us that have money and possessions, who have it and want more to make sure that we are secure

and in control, we know that our stuff can very easily take over our lives. It can blind us to God and to others because life becomes about keeping what we have for ourselves. It turns us inward instead of outward. And, it doesn't take lots of stuff to entangle us.

There is a story in the Sufi tradition of two monks who were traveling. On their way through one village, they stayed with a poor farmer. The farmer had only one possession, a goat. He loved the goat and all that the goat could give. He was very proud to be able to offer his guests goat milk and goat cheese. Upon leaving the younger monk said to the older one, "Will you not pray a blessing for our generous friend, the farmer?" The older monk prayed, "May his goat die."

A person may have more money than she can even count and not be attached to it. A poor person may have only a goat and be very attached. The issue for Jesus is not so much the actual money or possessions as the attachment we have to them. If we are attached, to the goat, to the money, to the possessions, we will do all we can to keep all of it, and we are not free. If we are able to let go, we can give our allegiance, our hearts, our lives to God and to others.

For until we are able to let go, we are all trapped. Talking on a completely different subject, Pastor Chris Erdman wrote something that struck home with me as I thought about this passage. He writes, "We will never find a way out and into God's future as long as we hold tightly to our visions and values, our designs and desires. Each and every one of us is trapped, like a monkey with his hand in the jar desperately gripping what he so desperately wants but cannot have unless he lets go" (*How to Enter the Future: Five Practices for the Church, The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 19, 2009, 11).

Is there a way that we can let go of our desperate clutch on our riches and pull our hands free? I hope so, with God's help. Should we give away all we have? That might be what God is calling us to. Can we? I doubt it. And so, we go away from Jesus...despairing, grieving,

saddened, lifeless. So who can be saved?-- we cry with the disciples. Who can experience God's abundant life?

Luckily, despair isn't the answer Jesus leaves us. For just after the young man goes away, Jesus says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God...For all of you it is impossible. But for God, all things are possible."

So if we are brave enough to ask the question, "What must we do? How can this empty space be filled? How can we have life?", we don't walk away empty. We walk away knowing that Jesus looks at us and loves us. Then, Jesus, God with us, offers us life, shows us what we are and what we can be. And, if we can take steps toward tearing down the wall that separates us from Jesus or even if we can't, Jesus loves us still and continues to hold out life for us.

My prayer for each of us and for all of us together is that God may give us the courage to ask the question and to listen to the answer. And then, dare I pray that our goats may die?
Amen.